

Mike Brearley The Classic Captain

A headmaster who later became Archbishop of Canterbury once described the game of cricket as 'organized loafing'. He would probably have expressed himself differently if he had ever had the experience of facing Lillee and Thompson in their prime. Any cynic who nonetheless thought Rudyard Kipling's phrase 'the flannelled fools at the wicket' an apt description of someone who chose to earn a living by facing the fastest bowling in the world would have to take account of Mike Brearley.

At Cambridge University Mike Brearley won high honours in both parts of the Tripos exam, first in classics, then in philosophy. His distinctions on the cricket field at the same time led him to a brief career as a county cricketer with Middlesex until he became a university lecturer in philosophy at Newcastle. He gave that up five years later — when Middlesex asked him to return to Lords as county captain. He felt he had already reached the limit of his own capability in philosophy, something he knew he had not done with his cricket. Little did he guess then that he would become the most successful post-war captain of England as well. When he kindly spoke to us for Omnibus last winter he, like everyone else, believed his days of playing for England were past. He was uncertain of the facts and figures of his test match career. Wisden masterminds may know whether any other cricketer with a classical education has ever achieved such eminence in the game.

Mike Brearley was born with cricket, but not classics, in his blood. His father played games for the Yorkshire 2nd XI before the war and afterwards, on moving south, played twice for Middlesex. Mike was involved in cricket even before his memory can recall it. His classics came much later. Both his parents were maths teachers with no classical background. At the City of London School his father was allowed a free education for one son. Mike went there and started Latin at the age of ten. The following year he won a school scholarship. His memory of his early years there is modestly tenuous, though he remembers with some amazement that in English his 11⁺ class read *The Gun* by C. S. Forester and *The Merchant of Venice*. He started Greek (set against German) in the third year, making the choice largely because it was normal for the brightest boys to go that way. Learning was a somewhat mechanical process, efficient rather than stimulating.

Bontoos — Leader or Led?

In his O-Level year his form master was a clerical classicist on the point of retirement. Lessons with the Rev. Ellingham were livelier. He gave all the boys nicknames in pseudo-Greek. Brearley's was 'Bontoos' i.e. B + ontoos, the Greek word for really. The class was divided in two teams, the Dumbheads and the Numbskulls and one lesson, possibly a double, was devoted to competitive Greek compositions backed up by cyclostyled sheets. In one adventure the class were sailing to the Sixth Form together in a boat which began to sink. Whereupon the order was given 'Everyone for himself. And the class presumably went on from there composing individually.

On another occasion the school had had a visit from Lord Baden-Powell, founder of the scout movement. In his speech he spoke about the need for all the boys to be leaders. His visit became the subject of a weekly composition and the class posed the question 'if all were leaders who would be the led?' Despite the humour and the apparent scurrility of these lessons they were the beginning of asking the bigger and broader questions about life, about the nature of leadership and so on, which extended his mind beyond the routines of more basic learning.

Odysseus Gets Eye In

On moving to the sixth form it was the recognized quality of the teaching, the small classes and the good results as much as anything which drew Brearley to specialize in classics. 'I was keen to avoid maths and advised, but in no way pressed, to pursue classics. Too much of the work was devoted to achieving proficiency in understanding of the languages and expressing oneself in them. It seems that t'Illes were learned as a means of solving a problem and too few wider questions tackled, but I largely blame myself for that. The teaching was excellent.'

He won a prize for Latin and Greek declamation for which his set pieces included Odysseus' first speech to Nausicaa. Homer was his favourite author and writing an essay comparing the translations of Chapman, Pope and Rieu gave him a new conception of what others saw or failed to see in Homer and stimulated his own reading. Another stimulus was a master who argued that the purpose of life was to have as many experiences of as many kinds as possible. 'Did this include being slowly burned in oil?' the class countered. The pleasure of ancient history came in the sixth form, too. The questions seemed more searching and worthwhile. For example, how far is it possible to know from the ancient sources what democracy was actually like? And how coloured are the sources by later commentators?

Brearley thinks he would have benefited from a year off between school and university. All that he knew about Oxford and Cambridge was that they both played cricket. So in choosing where to go he acted entirely on the advice of his sixth form master to apply to St. John's College, Cambridge. It proved a happy choice, as the college had no strong bias in any direction. Friends like Michael Silk, now a lecturer at King's College London, who opened his mind to the depths of poetry ancient and modern, influenced him a great

deal. He enthusiastically recalls studying ancient history with John Crook, a course on Latin lyric poetry by Guy Lee and one on Homer's world by Sir Moses Finley. When asked to write one essay on any subject of his own choosing Brearley chose the *Characters* of Theophrastus. He arrived late for the supervision after playing games and was stung by the comment at the end 'quality of thought immature'. He believes the choice of the *Characters* was a conscious attempt to find something which offered more psychological understanding of what people were like. This was the particular attraction of Greek tragedy.

'What Is Playing the Game?'

Another shock to the system came from attending lectures on Plato. 'I felt baffled by the questions being discussed, such as 'Is beauty in the eye of the beholder?' This seemed incomprehensible, but the attraction of Plato and philosophy in general was its attempt to cast light on things that were hard to understand. With Edward Craig, who opened the batting for Cambridge and fielded first slip, Brearley discussed the nature of freedom, our knowledge of other minds and other philosophical problems. So came about the change to philosophy for part two of the Tripos. More recently this has shifted to an interest in psychology, in the understanding of the unconscious and in psychotherapy.

Cricket had its challenges too. Quite apart from the sheer difficulty of it, playing against professionals for the university was a broadening experience in itself. The game posed interesting questions of discipline, self-control, strength, violence, courage, failure, leadership and so on. 'It helped me appreciate the difficulty of things and the complexities of personal interdependence,' he says.

Capax Imperii

His unexpected recall to captain England this summer against Australia and the dramatic and immediate change in England's fortunes under his leadership have led to some extravagant assessments of his almost magical powers in the Press. He is modest about them himself. He is conscious of a captain's responsibility to motivate and nurture his players and fascinated by the tactical complexities of the game. At present he is working on a book on captaincy, due to be published by Hodder and Stoughton later this year. In it he will concern himself with the changing social mores of cricket over the last hundred years as well as assessing the character and influence of famous captains of the game.

When Mike Brearley looks back to his classics he values the pleasure he derives from language and the play of language. He appreciates the background he has for reading other literature and is intrigued by the reflections of the ancient world in the modern and its continuing connections with it. He is concerned at and appalled by our national insularity with regard to modern languages which he believes should be taught from the age of seven or eight, and he regrets his own lack of fluency in French despite having learned it. But captaincy is his present concern and the classical world offers some good examples. No one is ever likely to say of Mike Brearley as Tacitus did of the Roman emperor Galba *capax imperii, nisi imperasset*, 'thought capable of wielding power if only he had not done so'. Brearley especially likes an example from Thucydides when the Athenian general Demosthenes spoke to encourage his troops before a Spartan attack at Pylos during the Peloponnesian War. Brearley paraphrases delightfully: 'Look, I don't want anyone to show off his intelligence by making precise calculations of the dangers we have confronting us. We are all in this together and the best thing is to be confident and not to think too much about it.' Hardly his way of winning the Ashes, one feels.

Mike Brearley was interviewed for Omnibus by Geoffrey Fallows, a classics teacher who is Deputy Head of Camden School for Girls in London. He hopes to interview Denis Healey about his classical background for the next issue of Omnibus.

